

Groups question energy corridors

Some want more study on how routes for new lines will affect federal lands in Western states

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated: 11/16/2007 01:18:28 AM MST

Environmental groups in the West want the U.S. Department of Energy to intensify its study of the routes it selected to serve as energy highways for new electric transmission lines and oil and gas pipelines across federal lands.

The DOE last week released an environmental impact statement and maps showing its preferred "energy corridors" in Utah and 10 other Western states. The corridors run for more than 6,000 miles and encompass more than 3 million acres.

Liz Thomas of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance said if the public looks at the DOE's maps they will see only "nice and tidy" lines depicting where future power and pipelines may eventually run.

"You have to get on the ground, though, to see the canyons, the rivers and the world-class scenery that could be impacted," Thomas said in a teleconference Thursday morning. "Some of those corridors are the last place you would want to see such development."

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 instructed the various government agencies that hold federal lands to set aside part of their holdings for energy transmission as a way to improve supply and distribution and help keep energy affordable for consumers.

Another goal of the act was to speed up the process that energy companies must go through to get permission to run their electric transmission and pipelines across federal property and eliminate redundancy in the environmental review process.

But Nada Culver, senior counsel for The Wilderness Society's BLM Action Center in Denver, said the maps only show where the corridors run across federal lands. There is no indication of where the routes' future pipelines and powerlines may run as they traverse what could be environmentally sensitive state and private lands.

"It is vital to protecting wilderness and wildlife that we know where those corridors actually go, instead of appearing as if they just run off into nowhere," she said. "We also need to know who is going to use them and what they're going to use them for."

Thomas pointed out that one corridor would run "right past the front door of Arches National Park and continue through the narrow Moab Canyon to the south. "The canyon is simply too narrow to put everything they want in it."

The DOE's proposed corridors - there are 14 in Utah alone - will be anywhere from two-thirds of a mile to four miles wide. Each corridor could hold as many as nine electric transmission lines, 35 petroleum and 29 natural gas pipelines.

"The DOE really didn't offer alternatives for its corridors, which is unusual," Thomas said.

"We need to figure out where to put these things so they have the least amount of impact on the land."

The other Western states designated for energy corridors include Arizona, California,

Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming.

For the next 90 days the public can provide the DOE comments on its energy corridor plans, Thomas said.

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